Tangled Up in Blue

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Tangled Up in Blue

by Cherlocked (cher69)

Summary

Deputy US Marshal Raylan Givens' personnel jacket contains a report on the first man he ever killed in the line of duty, a Texas fugitive by the name of Cy Gutterson.
Only Raylan never shot him. But Tim sure did.

Notes

The title of and the inspiration for this fic came from a Bob Dylan song. If you're familiar with the song, you'll see the nod in narrative elements throughout the story--including the theme, if I did my job right. I suppose this story is really a fusion of "Justified" and Dylan's song. Fusions seem to be my schtick.

If you don't know the song, give it a spin. It's Dylan; the lyrics are vague and specific and metaphoric all at once. Personally, I've always liked the Indigo Girls version of "Tangled Up in Blue" best.

If you read me on AO3, you'll know I am totally cheating on my long-form fic by writing this. But the idea grabbed me by the throat and wouldn't let go. If you do read the Holler series, don't fret. I'll be hip deep in the next chapter any minute now.

As always, I have people to thank because I believe firmly in the beta and workshop processes. That said, the people who tell you "yes, do this" but "no, don't put that in there" are often as vested in a story as the writer, but they don't get the fun comments and kudos.

So, please send them warm thoughts. They deserve it. They helped me make this work better.

First off, I promised AlyseofWonderland that I would praise her after this was written since I blamed her more than a few times for not stopping me when I got this idea last week. Cheers, Alyse. High praise your way. xxox

Now, on to thanks to those who beta'd for me on this one:
Thank you forever and always to Jonjo for all the heavy-lifting--so, so much heavy-lifting on this one--and her unending patience with my habitual need to abuse (or blatantly ignore) the past perfect tense. (It's wayyyy worse when I am not writing a 100K word tome and feel even mildly arty about a fic.) Send her extra warm feels, please.

Hugs and thanks to Bulma90_13 for her grabby hands. Sometimes, one of the highest

compliments is knowing you've written something that someone WILL NOT WAIT for you to hand over. (She also did some heavy-lifting in the word-picking stages.)

A new face to reading me in production: thanks to TotidemVerbis. Thank you for telling me this *is* something. Sometimes you gotta hear that to keep rolling.

Props go out to aces_low for checking my graphic (it's on Tumblr) to make sure the teaser lines weren't too much story.

(Oops, forgot this at posting so I adding it now: last but far, far from least much love to MrsRidcully for helping hammer out what the hell kind of boots Raylan would wear before he found his style. (And another nod to Alyse for suggesting Red Wings.)

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So, things to know about this fic beyond the thematic mirroring of "Tangled Up" the song: I played with the timeline of "Justified" a little bit years-wise and I edged on the side of the ten-year difference between Raylan and Tim versus the twelve. Canon seems to think ten-twelve. Everything happens a couple years earlier in this story than in canon. This shift probably isn't noticeable to anyone but me. Otherwise, I tried to stick as close to canon as I could. For fun.

Speaking of canons: this is a fanwork. Obs, I don't own "Justified" or Dylan's song. I am just playing around in their worlds and mushing them together as I see fit. Props to Yost, Leonard and Dylan. Timothy Olyphant and Jacob Pitts, too, for continuing to be so damned inspiring.
xxox
-C

See the end of the work for more notes
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October 1996—Corpus Christi, Texas

Raylan noticed the kid's hair first-off. When the Texas sun hit it just right, the mop of wavy hair glowed with a red undertone.

He normally went in for blonds—both the curvy and the buff variety—and a whole lot older than this kid. But he could admit, if only to himself, that the color sure was pretty.

Raylan crossed the street of the beat-down neighborhood to approach him.

When the redhead turned to him, Raylan forgot all about his hair because he found himself all tangled up over a set of blue eyes flecked with ice that he was sure could refract light.

"You need somethin'?" the kid asked, stopping a healthy distance away from Raylan his hands shoved in pockets of baggy jeans with the knees torn out. Those icy blue eyes took his measure with more wisdom and distrust than Raylan expected.

In that reality check, Raylan found his footing.

He was hunting a pair of bandits. Brothers. Their files told him this should be the son of one, nephew of the other. The uncle had skipped his court appearance, and the father was wanted on a charge of theft with assault—a side of drunk and disorderly thrown in for good measure.

Raylan eyed the redhead again, recalling the file.

Sixteen. Just barely. What was his name again? Was it Tom? No. *Tim*.

Raylan turned on the charm, trying to get a read on the kid. He hoped the younger Gutterson wouldn't lie to him about where his uncle and father were. Family had a tendency to do that.

"I do," Raylan drawled and added a smile. "Ya wouldn't happen to be Tim, would ya?"

He let the Kentucky accent sing in his voice; the Appalachian twang would never pass for Texan but maybe the kid wouldn't realize that.

The teenager looked surprised. And interested. Too interested as his eyes darted up and down Raylan's body. He'd seen that kind of assessment before, but not usually from someone so young.

Raylan pushed down a stab of guilt because he was pretty sure he was about to take advantage of Tim's burgeoning interest.

"Yeah… how d'ya know that?" Tim asked.

Raylan held his hands up in a gesture to communicate he was harmless, then he pulled his jacket to the side flashing the badge at his belt and the SIG on his hip.

Tim's eyes narrowed on the gun, then grew big and panicky.

"What'd I do?" Tim asked. His hands flew into the air at the question.

Raylan's brow knit at the response. "Nothin' I know of. Did ya do somethin' that'd raise the interest of the US Marshals Service?"

Tim pulled his shirtsleeves down from his elbows and crossed his arms. But before he could hide the bruises, Raylan spotted them. He wasn't that much younger than Raylan—maybe a ten year difference. He remembered sixteen. Being less than a decade free of Arlo Givens' rage wasn't healing time enough for Raylan, and he saw himself in the finger-shaped bruises on Tim's wrist and forearm.

"Name's Raylan Givens. I'm hopin' ya might be able to tell me the whereabouts of your uncle Gilbert Gutterson and your father, Cyril."

Tim's long sigh was drawn out and too tired for someone his age. "If I help ya find 'em, do ya promise to take 'em both off and keep 'em away 'til after I graduate?"

"Might just be able to help you with that," Raylan said.

Ten days later, Raylan's home phone rang late, waking him from a dead sleep.

"Givens," he mumbled, sleep thick in his voice.

"Now. He's here." Raylan recognized the hushed voice on the line. Tim Gutterson.

Holding the phone to his ear with his shoulder, he was already tugging on his jeans. "You all right, Tim?"

"He *knows* ."

"I'm on my way," Raylan said.

Raylan had been talking to Tim—or rather listening to the kid talk. His mama lit out for parts unknown years back. He was gay, and his daddy beat him whenever he had the chance. Tim was trying to dodge his way clear of Cy Gutterson's fists until he could enlist in the Army. He told Raylan his dreams of one day joining the special forces.

But Raylan had a different plan. As soon as he caught up with Cy and hauled him back to jail, he was calling child services. Tim's father had left the kid to fend for himself for so long that he wouldn't even tell Raylan the number of days or weeks. Raylan suspected Tim was dragging this out. He'd been carrying bruises when Raylan met him, so he thought Cy'd been

around sometime more recent than not. After all, he'd left his marks. Regardless of whether Tim was telling Raylan the whole truth or not, Cy had been in the wind for a while now.

However, his brother Gil hadn't.

Tim had led Raylan and another deputy in the Corpus Christi office to his uncle's girlfriend two nights after Raylan first walked up to him on the street. Bandits always ran to their women. Raylan just hadn't had the intel that Gil had a wife *and* a side piece.

The side piece had been angry when Raylan and the other deputy from his office packed Gil into the back of a Texas State Police cruiser. She'd followed Raylan into the street to holler at him, then she'd seen Tim and turned her anger on the teen.

"You're as bad as Gil says, you little pansy-ass shit," she yelled.

Tim let Raylan step in front of him. "Now, ma'am. If you don't get yourself under control, we'll take you in, too."

"What, you got yourself a new boyfriend?" she yelled, trying to reach around Raylan to swipe at Tim.

"So what if I do?" Tim shouted back.

Raylan's partner shot him a look. He shook his head in tight little moves. "Kid, cut it out. You're going to get *me* arrested."

"Just wait 'til your daddy finds out what you done," she hissed, then stalked away.

Raylan had given Tim a cell phone to keep on him with his number programmed into it. Tim said he could handle himself—that his father hadn't been home for a while. Raylan thought he was lying for some reason.

Raylan hadn't wanted to leave him there, but until he brought in child services, he had to. Tim wasn't going to be happy when that happened.

Raylan pulled his Crown Vic in front of the Gutterson house.

The house had seen better days; the whole neighborhood had. Not that Raylan was one to judge considering his own childhood.

Raylan had been by Tim's house morning and night. Before and after school, every day.

He'd taken to picking up carryout and talking the kid into eating with him. If his parent hadn't been around in weeks, what was Tim living on?

The night before, he'd brought a bucket of chicken thinking the kid could have the leftovers later. After watching Tim inhale three pieces, Raylan was sorry he hadn't brought two. At least Tim didn't stand on ceremony and hide his hunger anymore.

Raylan wondered what Cy Gutterson knew.

Did he know that Raylan had been coming around to his house and feeding his kid? Did he know that Tim turned in his uncle to the US Marshals Service?

He heard the yelling as soon as he opened the car door. Raylan ran for the door and banged with his fist.

"US Marshals Service," Raylan yelled.

"You goddamned little faggot. I'll fuckin' kill you myself—"

"Dad, no!" What he heard through the door raised the hair on the back of his neck. Rhythmic banging and harsh cries. Raylan heard enough and pushed open the front door entering with his SIG-Saur drawn.

"US Marshals Service," Raylan shouted again.

"Raylan…"

He saw Tim at the foot of the stairs in a broken pile.

"Christ Tim, are you all right?" Raylan holstered his weapon. He took Tim's face in his hands and turned it one way, then the other. Tim'd been beaten. His nose was likely broken. Blood flowed freely from it. His eye was already swelling but wasn't shut. His bottom lip was puffier than normal, sporting a cut on the side.

"No… think I broke my leg."

"He broke your leg too?" Raylan was stunned by the damage on his face. "How'd he do that?"

"Fell. Down the steps."

Raylan looked up the steps. "Fell or he pushed you?"

"Pushed me."

"Where is he?"

"Up there." Tim's eyes tracked up the steps. "Packing."

Raylan stood up, planning to go after Cy.

"Don't leave me," Tim said, grabbing Raylan by the cuff of his jeans.

Raylan stopped. He pulled his backup piece—a smaller Glock—and gave it to Tim handle first. Tim took it.

“You know how to use that?” Raylan asked.

Tim didn’t answer but had the magazine open. “There one in the chamber?” he asked.

“Yeah. How do you know weapons?”

Tim tipped his head in the direction of the stairs.

Raylan moved up the stairs slowly with his SIG drawn again. When he got to the top, he moved to the wall so he could make his way across the landing.

He’d cleared no more than half that space when Cy Gutterson came barreling out of nowhere. He tackled Raylan to the floor. He landed hard on his back with Cy’s considerable weight coming down on top of him. Cy wasn’t a tall man, but broad and thickly muscled. His grabbed the wrist of Raylan’s gun hand and banged it on the floor until he dropped his SIG.

“You the one who’s been fucking my son?” Cy spit at him.

“Hell no,” Raylan said. He tried kneeing the son of a bitch but failed. He tried bucking the man off him but couldn’t.

“Ruby tole me all about you ’n Tim,” Cy said. “You like cock so much, maybe you should suck mine.”

“It’s not like that,” Tim yelled.

“You shut yer mouth, you little shit,” Cy shouted back to Tim. He stretched forward, grabbed Raylan’s SIG, and leveled the weapon at Raylan’s head.

“I can kill you or you can show me what you been doin’ to my son,” Cy demanded, then shouted at Tim. “I know you like to look, you little faggot. I found your dirty magazines hid in the shed.”

“Raylan wouldn’t touch me,” Tim screamed again.

Cy started to stand and took aim at Raylan again. He was about to topple the man when he heard his Glock report and the back of Cy Gutterson’s head blow onto the back wall of his upstairs landing.

Raylan back-crabbed out from under the dead man, kicking his legs free where Cy’s body had crumpled.

“Damn, Tim,” Raylan muttered, lifting his head to look down at Tim. “Nice shot.”

“Aim’s the only good thing I got from him,” Tim said.

Raylan cocked his head, considering. “His seemed pretty off. Yours is a helluva lot better.” He started down the steps when he heard the sirens. He’d called for backup on his way over, but Raylan figured some neighbor called in the gunshot, lighting a fire under the local LEOs so they came in hot.

A moment later he was beside Tim, who’d clearly heard the sirens, too.

“Will I go to prison?” Tim asked.

“Gimme the gun.” The order was quiet.

“But I’m the one who killed…”

“Now, none of that. He took my gun, then threw you down the stairs. He was going to finish the job when I came down to check on you. I put him down to avoid that. Got it?”

“But…”

“Do you understand, Tim?” Raylan insisted.

“Fine, but why?”

“It’ll go easier on you this way. You’re gonna have enough to deal with,” Raylan said. He took his Glock back and pulled his badge to flash at the LEOs when he stepped outside. “Just hang on. I’m going out there to get you an ambulance.”

The next evening Raylan found Tim’s room at the hospital.

His chief hadn’t been happy with him; he’d barely been a deputy for more than a year and he was already on administrative leave until they cleared his shooting. In the meantime, since this was his first shooting, they’d ordered him to have a psych eval.

“Hey kid,” Raylan said, pushing the door open. He dropped the carryout order of Tejano barbecue with slaw and Texas toast on the tray table perched over Tim’s hospital bed.

Tim grabbed the bag and started pulling out food.

“You *can* have that, can’t cha?” Raylan asked, too late. For a skinny kid, he sure could eat.

Tim shrugged and shoved a slice of Texas toast in his mouth.

“Doctors find out if that leg broke because it’s hollow?” Raylan pulled a chair next to the bed and settled back into it.

Tim squinted his eyes at him and chewed. “You got a smart mouth for a cop."

Raylan raised his eyebrows at him.

“What’s the prognosis? Will you walk again?” Raylan waved at the cast on Tim’s lower left leg.

“Little break,” Tim said. “It’ll be fine.”

“No surgery?” Raylan asked.

“Just the cast,” Tim said. He slowly unwrapped the napkin from around a plastic fork and knife set, avoiding Raylan’s eyes. “Nobody came for me.”

“They won’t. I told them I shot Cy.”

“Why?” Tim stabbed at the pulled pork loin. He put the fork down and popped the top off a styrofoam cup of what the locals called “sause.”

Raylan watched him pour the hot barbecue sauce over the pork and then mash them together before shoving a bite into this mouth.

“It was my gun,” Raylan said.

“Dat can’ be righ',” Tim said around the food.

Raylan ignored him. “Cy threw you down the stairs, and I shot him before he could shoot one of us.”

His fork in midair, Tim’s wide blue eyes held his longer than was appropriate. Raylan licked his lips and looked away.

“What are you going to do next?” Raylan changed the subject to something he wanted to know.

“Maybe I’ll disappear,” Tim mumbled before he took another bite.

Raylan’s stomach tightened at that. “Why’d you want to do that?”

“Child services been around,” Tim said. “Social worker wants to put me in the system.”

“You’re sixteen. You might have some options.”

“Like?”

“Emancipation,” Raylan offered. “Or if you got any other family, maybe they could take you in?” Raylan wasn’t sure if Tim did. He’d been through the file when he was chasing Gil and Cy.

“I got an aunt on my ma’s side outside Pawnee,” Tim said.

Child services put Tim into a foster home for a couple months until his leg healed. After that, Tim called Raylan to tell him he was moving to his aunt’s house.

“You need a ride?” Raylan offered. Tim had been on his mind, and Raylan liked the idea of seeing for himself that Tim was settled somewhere.

Silence met his question.

“You still there?”

“You’d do that?” Tim’s disbelief carried over the phone.

“Sure,” Raylan said.

Raylan was late picking Tim up. The drive from Corpus Christi to Pawnee was about ninety minutes. By the time he’d gotten on the road it was already dusk. Tim was off his crutches and in a walking boot. He told Raylan when he got into the car that his aunt would only have to take him for one more check-up. His recovery time and the follow-up appointments had been a factor in child services placing him in a foster home rather than packing him off to his aunt’s straight-away.

When Raylan turned down the long dirt road leading out to Tim’s Aunt Donna’s house, Tim grew quiet. Up to that point, he’d talked Raylan’s ear raw. Not that he minded the chatter. Raylan’d missed hearing the kid talk.

“Is that it up there?” Raylan asked. The single mailbox at the turn-off indicated there was only one house at the end of the road.

“Stop here,” Tim said.

Raylan pulled to the side of the dirt road.

“Can you turn it off?”

Raylan put the Crown Vic into park and turned off the ignition. The night was pitch and silent. “You gonna be all right all the way out here?” Raylan looked around. The place was pretty isolated. He thought again of Kentucky. “Grew up in a place not all that different from this.”

“Kentucky. I remember.” Raylan’d told Tim about how bad he wanted out of Harlan growing up.

“This place gets too much for ya, call. We’ll… find some other way,” Raylan said, turning back to Tim. He punched the button on the interior dome light so he could see Tim’s expression.

He didn’t answer. He unbuckled the seatbelt Raylan’d made him put on and turned in his seat. He slid across the gap between them and grabbed Raylan’s sports jacket. He tugged, pulling them together and then Tim’s mouth was on his.

As far as first kisses went, Tim's wasn't awful. He had the upper hand because Raylan never saw it coming. He was shocked into a compliance that encouraged Tim to tilt his head and press his tongue into Raylan's mouth. When their tongues touched, Tim moaned.

He tasted like his spearmint gum and faint traces of the Frostie that Raylan'd bought him for desert on their way out to his aunt's. Raylan's hands found Tim's shoulders and pushed him back, breaking their kiss.

Tim's eyes were still closed and he looked like he was kissing air. Raylan licked his lips, still tasting the kiss. "Tim. You gotta know I can't—"

His eyes floated open and Raylan saw the track of his emotions play out in his face. Confusion in the icy flecks of his pretty blue eyes, then the rapid blinking queuing an embarrassed blush that spread across Tim's impossibly fair skin. How did a kid live in a beach town and stay that pale?

Tim retreated back to his half of the front seat. "I expected as much," he said. "Why would you want me?"

Raylan gripped the steering wheel at ten and two and stared forward into the dark, sad night. The interior light made it seem so much darker out there. Raylan hit the light again, turning it off.

"It ain't about wanting or not wanting you. You're too damned young. I'm a deputy marshal. I put men who touch boys your age back in jail for a living," Raylan bit out.

"Great. Now you're mad." Tim turned from him. "Just let me off here. I'll walk the rest of the way." Tim already had his door open when Raylan stretched across him and grabbed the handle.

"Stay put. I said I'd take you to your aunt's, and I'm damned well gonna do that."

Tim's Aunt Donna was nice enough. Plain. Soft-spoken. Raylan carried Tim's bags just past the front door into the house.

Donna said she would have shown him around, but Tim's cousins were already asleep upstairs. Raylan could see pictures of family and a crucifix on the wall. Small kids. Religious family.

Tim followed him back out to the porch steps. Raylan reached the bottom step when he heard Tim speak.

"We'll we meet again someday?"

"'Course."

Six months later

March 1997—Pawnee, Texas

About six months later, Raylan was hunting a fugitive out in Texas' Western District who'd cut and run after his bail hearing. After they'd delivered their bandit back into custody in Austin, Raylan headed back for Corpus Christi.

The drive took him near Pawnee where he'd dropped Tim, so he decided to stop by.

He knocked on the door and heard barking and babies crying.

A little blonde girl answered the door. Raylan thought he saw a hint of resemblance in the curve of her cheek and the shape of her eyes. One of Tim's cousins, maybe.

"Who're you?" she asked. "Not s'posed to open the door to strangers."

"Good thinking," he said. Raylan pulled his badge off his belt and held it against the screen at her eye level. "I'm a deputy US marshal."

"What's that?" she squinted at the badge.

"A type of policeman," he said. "Is your cousin Tim home or maybe your mama?"

She shifted her eyes from the badge to Raylan's face. "Tim don't live here no more."

Raylan inhaled. "Where's he live?"

"Nowhere," she said.

Raylan's stomach dropped to his balls. "What—honey, can you get your ma—"

"Haley, what are you doing—oh, it's you." Tim's Aunt Donna appeared behind her daughter.

"Ma'am," Raylan said. "Haley here was telling me that Tim moved out?" Raylan hoped that was true—that Tim wasn't dead.

Donna glared at him. "He lit out of here a few weeks back. Got himself *emancipated* first. Said you told him to do it," she said.

"Not for some time. Well before he moved on out here," he said. "Do you know where he is?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," she said. "His Uncle Gil got out of jail and came around to stir up trouble. Tim was gone a few days later."

"Shit," Raylan muttered.

“That policeman said a bad word.” Haley told on him.

Raylan started to apologize, then didn’t bother; Donna had already shut the door in his face.

Two years later

June 1999—New Orleans, Louisiana

Two years later, a fugitive wanted for homicide was on the run in Louisiana. The state’s Western District called in for reinforcements. Since Raylan was still one of the newest deputies in his district, Raylan’s chief sent him to schlep around the woods and swamps doing grunt work.

They’d tracked the guy across the state. Raylan got mosquito-bit and braved snakes, gators, and god-knows what-all to comb through an expanse of marshland outside New Orleans chasing nothing but a bad tip. A Florida State Trooper finally found the bandit outside Tallahassee on his way to south Florida. Raylan had one more night in the area before he was heading back to Texas. He was going to treat himself to a fancy hotel in the French Quarter and some agreeable company.

He showered and found the address of a gay bar in town. He’d seen a couple women in Texas. In fact, he’d seen some men in the past, too, but he wasn’t out. After Tim tried to kiss him, he’d had a hard time even taking his cock in hand and shooting a load to a fantasy that included any man. Tim’s blue eyes would float through his mind. Raylan decided while he was out of town, he’d go have a beer and pick up a guy. Maybe a brunet to shake himself free of the redhead who never escaped his mind.

Raylan couldn’t help wondering if Tim’s hair still looked red or if he would grow out of that.

He’d looked for Tim after he left his aunt’s a couple years ago, but Tim must have made good on the threat he’d tossed out in the hospital. He just disappeared. Raylan swallowed back the guilt that rushed up his throat. He should have known about Gil’s release. He could have warned Tim. Raylan should have taken precautions so Tim didn’t have to.

The gay club was off the beaten track—it was outside the French Quarter and off a back street. That was fine with Raylan. He slid up to the bar and ordered a bottle of Dixie. He wandered over to a table and sat down. The place was like a cabaret. The bouncer even charged him seven bucks to get in. When Raylan questioned the cover, he learned it was for the floor show.

Raylan'd stopped paying close attention to the men parading out onto the stage, then slipping back off wearing a whole lot less. They spun and gyrated while their clothes fell away. He'd known a house of ill repute in Harlan, but he always had a hard time seeing the appeal. He'd noticed some of the strippers circulating. They'd sit with a customer for a spell, then that customer would go out the side door. Seemed obvious enough to Raylan, they were turning tricks on the side.

He probably would have headed on out if the waiter hadn't made Raylan's table his gravitational center. Vince just dropped by with his third beer. Raylan was pretty sure he was flirting with him. He had dark hair under a little bowler hat and short shorts on. Pretty much on the mark for the kind of guy he'd been thinking of bringing back to his room.

Raylan tipped back the bottle and happened to glance over at the stage and he saw *him* under a wash of blue lights. His face was turned to the side but he'd know that nose anywhere.

"What's *his* name?" Raylan asked Vince as if he didn't already know.

"Who?" Vince looked annoyed for the first time that night.

Raylan didn't dare look away from Tim. "The one under the blue lights."

"That's Harlan," he said.

"What?" Raylan choked on his beer. He rubbed it off his chin with the back of his hand. "What the hell kinda name is that?"

"Harlan? It's a stage name." Bowler hat Vince was definitely pissed off. He moved on to one of his other tables.

Raylan saw Tim's eyes slide his way and catch Raylan looking back before he turned another direction. Raylan wondered if Tim recognized him. He watched Tim move… his hips rotate and roll as he turned. Jesus, he had a great ass. Had he always had that? His skin still looked as fair as it always had, but Christ, Raylan couldn't stop himself from mapping his freckles and moles. He had more chest hair than Raylan expected. Had it been that way when Tim was in the hospital? That was the only time he'd seen much of Tim out of his street clothes.

How old was he now? Nineteen. Old enough to know. And know better.

When the song ended, the men on stage strutted back through the curtain. Tim's face was in profile, but he turned once before the curtains swallowed him and stared at Raylan. Oh, Tim knew; Raylan'd been made.

He only hoped Tim wanted to be found.

Vince stopped back by with another bottle of Dixie. Raylan pointed to the back of the house with two fingers, figuratively shooting the back wall of the damned place. "What do I need to do if I want talk to one of your dancers?" he asked.

Vince frowned. "You see lap dances happening out here? This ain't that kind of place." He crossed his arms and tapped his foot.

“How much for ten minutes of Harlan’s time?”

“I thought you were a cop.” Vince curled his lip.

“Deputy marshal,” Raylan said. “How much?”

Vince shook his head. “Don’t know what kinda cop you are. Going rate’s fifty for a ‘conversation’,” he said.

Raylan fought back a surge of anger. He pulled his wallet. “Can you tell—”

“I know. Harlan. Hold on to your money. I’ll deliver your message,” Vince said, disgusted. “My time woulda been free.” Raylan could hear regret in his final words.

Raylan offered him a smile. “That’s a kind offer. I just… need to talk to Harlan.”

The crowd started thinning out, and Raylan began to think that Tim wasn’t coming out to the floor at all. He thought about badging his way into the back. If Tim wouldn’t come to him, he’d go to Tim. But Raylan told himself to wait.

He was peeling the white, green, and yellow label from his beer bottle when he felt someone behind him. He twisted around in his seat and found Tim’s long fingers wrapped around one of the rails in the chair’s back.

“Raylan.”

“I thought you’d never come say hello,” Raylan said, standing up. “Never took you for the silent type.”

“I’m not—I…” Tim started, then looked down, not meeting his eyes.

“Tim?” Raylan said, suddenly unsure.

The next thing Tim did threw Raylan off his stride.

Tim knelt before him and tied Raylan’s steel-toed work boot. When had that come undone? He didn’t lace them all the way to the top, but he was sure he’d wrapped the long laces around the bootlegs and double-knotted them. He watched Tim’s long fingers tug up his jeans cuff and work the laces.

Raylan felt self-conscious about an open display that was so oddly intimate. At the same time, the sight of Tim on his knees before him was arousing. Raylan let his hand fall to brush Tim’s long hair away from his forehead.

Tim pressed his cheek into his hand and blue eyes tipped up to meet Raylan’s. They were lined in black eyeliner from his stage set. “I… um… need the fifty up front.”

The spell was broken. He saw shame in Tim’s eyes before he looked back down to Raylan’s Red Wings. He wondered what the hell Tim was into.

Raylan let his hand fall away from Tim's face, but he nodded in agreement. "All right." Raylan pulled out his wallet and handed Tim the money.

"I need to give it to my manager. Then we can talk." Tim stood up.

"You'll be back though?"

Tim smiled sadly. "Yeah. Wouldn't miss it."

Raylan sat back down at the table and waited. A few minutes later, Tim was back.

"You want something?" Raylan asked. "I can get Vince to bring you… where is that guy? He's been glued to the table all night and now that I need him—"

"It's fine," Tim said, resting his forearms across the small tabletop. His hands were restless. They just couldn't seem to fall idle. Raylan wanted to take them in his own.

"I looked for you," Raylan said.

Tim jerked his eyes to Raylan's again. "You did? When?"

"Been two years past. Never found anything," Raylan said, his voice low. "I was afraid you were dead."

Tim's brow furrowed and Raylan noticed that the dent between his brows was deeper now. "I —Gil came back for me. I didn't think you'd even notice I was gone."

"I'm sorry about that. I should have monitored him. I should have let you know…"

Tim shrugged.

"So you're living in New Orleans now?"

"For now. What are you doing here?"

"Fugitive hunt."

"No, I meant *here*. If you never found me, how did know to look here?" Tim asked. His expression conveyed uncertainty. He blinked at Raylan and picked up the torn label Raylan had peeled from his beer. Tim began rolling the label into a tiny tube.

Raylan took a long pull on his beer. It'd gone warm while he'd been waiting on Tim. "I was just looking for company."

Tim eyebrows pulled together further, making him seem even more confused. "You know this is a gay bar, right?"

Raylan rotated the edge of the bottle's base around on the table. Halfway 'round one way, then back the other. "I do."

"Oh." Tim wide eyes made Raylan think he'd stunned him.

“When are you finished with your shift?”

“I have one more set.”

“I’ll wait.”

When Tim went to perform his last set, Raylan gave up his table and gravitated over to the bar figuring it was better to put some space between him and Vince.

He might have taken the waiter back to his hotel had he not run into Tim.

Finally, Tim showed up dressed in street clothes instead of his stripper getup. The black mesh shirt that clung to his chest when he came out to talk to Raylan was gone but he still wore the painted-on jeans. What happened to his baggy jeans with the ripped-out knees? These clung to him, as did the white T-shirt. Raylan wondered if they were street clothes at all.

Raylan finished his beer and followed Tim out the door.

The bouncer’s eyes tracked between them suspiciously.

“You leavin’ with a customer, Harlan?” the big man asked. “Beau’s not gonna like it.”

Raylan pulled out his badge. “Harlan and I go way back.”

The bouncer turned to Tim, who nodded.

“Guess the cover was worth it then?” the bouncer retorted to Raylan.

“Guess so.”

Out front of the club, Tim stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. “You drive here?”

“Walked. Hotel ain’t all that far,” Raylan said. “Where are we going?”

“We could go to your hotel?” Tim proposed. Raylan picked up a trace of hope and the suggestion of acts left unsaid.

“Why don’t you show me where you’re living?”

Tim groaned. “Fine.”

Tim had been living in a fleabag motel further than a decent walk from the club.

“Oh no. Fuck no, all my shit,” Tim cried.

Piles of clothes, toiletries, and papers were tossed outside the room.

“All this is yours?”

“Yeah, shit. And it all ain’t here,” Tim said. He was digging through a pile of clothes.

Raylan picked up a white cowboy hat with curled sides from the top of another pile and put it on. “Fits.”

Tim stopped and stared at him. “That’s a good look on you. But you can do better than a straw hat.”

Raylan took the hat off and examined the material. The weave was tight enough that it didn’t look like straw. He put it back on. “This’ll do for now.”

“I can’t find it,” Tim muttered, frustration giving way to an edge of panic.

“What are you missing?”

“My Discman,” Tim said. “And um…”

Raylan froze at his tone. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. “What else?”

“My Ruger. I got it from my dad.”

Raylan narrowed his eyes. “Is it clean?”

“Of course it’s clean. I keep all my guns clean.” Tim’s eyebrows told Raylan he was affronted.

“How many do you have?” Raylan asked, suspiciously. Those little hairs weren’t standing down.

Tim tipped his head to the side. “Just that one. Now. Used to have others. My aunt took ’em ’cause I wasn’t of age. She didn’t want them in the house. I… um… hid the Ruger.”

“All right.” Raylan rubbed his face and pushed forward. “I meant clean like, did you commit a crime with it?”

If he thought Tim was affronted before, that was nothing to his expression after Raylan asked that question. Raylan winced as he watched the emotions play out on his face.

Tim finally smiled tightly. “You mean like, did I kill a man and hand the weapon off to someone else?” His tone was snide, and Raylan supposed he deserved that.

“Yeah. Like that.” Raylan needed to know if the gun was clean and clear. “Kill anyone lately?”

“The Ruger is clean and crime-free. And it’s registered to me in Texas.”

“Let’s go see the manager.”

The manager was greasy—from his hair through to the way he spoke—and downright uncooperative.

Raylan had expected no less.

He flipped out his badge as he read the name on the guy's tag. Darren.

"Here's the situation, Darren. We're here to collect Mr. Gutterson's weapon and his… tape recorder," Raylan said, shooting Tim a questioning look.

"Discman. It's a CD player."

Darren squinted at Raylan's badge. "Since when do marshals care about two-bit whores who don't pay their rent?"

"Hey—" Tim started. "I ain't a…"

Raylan waved his hand at Tim to shut up and by some miracle, he did. Then he pursed his lips and nodded as if Darren's question was fair. "See, the federal government ain't required to keep you informed about its witnesses, now is it?"

Darren picked something from between two of his front teeth with the nail of his little finger. "Does when that witness owes me back rent. Federal government gonna pay that?"

"You gonna give us back his possessions?" Raylan asked.

Darren pulled out the Discman and the gun from under the counter.

Seeing the weapon, Raylan's hand went to his own.

"Slowly. Back away from the gun, Darren."

Darren's eyes darted to Raylan, and then down to his hand. He held his hands up and backed away.

"How much back rent are we talking?"

"Raylan…" Tim tried to interrupt. He waved his hand at Tim to hush him up again.

"Eight-hundred dollars," Darren answered.

Raylan winced, and Tim balked. "No way. Three-hundred bucks, tops."

"That true Darren?" Raylan drew the words out.

Darren's eyes tracked between Tim and Raylan, cringing.

Raylan kept his right hand at his hip with his weapon and pulled his wallet from his back left pocket. He handed it to Tim.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Raylan said. “Tim here is gonna give you two hundred bucks. We’re taking his gun and CD player, and you’re gonna call it all even. How about that?”

“Fine,” Darren agreed.

“Tim, get Darren’s money outta my wallet.”

“You don’t hafta do this,” Tim whispered to Raylan.

“Pretty sure I do,” Raylan replied.

Tim opened his wallet and pulled out the money.

“Hold up a second, Tim. Darren. You’re gonna grab us some garbage bags. That’d be a neighborly thing to do, wouldn’t it?”

“They’re in back with housekeeping,” Darren said.

Raylan shrugged. “Go on, then. Bring ’em on out, and Tim’ll give you your money.”

The sooner he got Darren away from the Ruger, the sooner he could dial back the tension in the room.

“What are you going to do now?” Raylan asked.

They’d shoved all of Tim’s remaining clothes into garbage bags. Tim surreptitiously picked out certain items and setting them aside, sorting them into a different bag. Raylan didn’t think Tim knew he’d noticed.

“Go back to the shelter, I guess.”

“That why you’re packing a separate bag?”

Tim’s hands flew into the air. Raylan liked that he still talked with his hands. “Yes, dammit. They’ll never let me keep all this with me.”

“So, say we don’t do that, then.”

Raylan had just enough cash on him to call a cab to take them back to his hotel. It was going to be a tight month if this kept up. He mentally thought about what he had in savings—which wasn’t all that much.

When the cab pulled up outside the Sheraton on Canal Street, the doorman on duty balked at the garbage bags as Raylan started to unload them onto one of the hotel’s luggage carts.

“Sir, you cannot bring *that* into the hotel,” he said, looking at two of the black garbage bags already on the cart.

Raylan rolled his eyes. “Fine.”

He had to use his credit card to pay the driver to pull around to the parking garage so he could transfer all of Tim’s worldly possessions to his car. The cabbie wasn’t any happier when he had to wait around for a confirmation after calling the number into dispatch.

They rode the elevator up to Raylan’s floor and he keyed them into the room. He had a suite with a king bed and a little sitting area.

“I think that couch pulls out,” Raylan said. “Tomorrow we can sort out what you’re gonna do next. After we get some sleep.”

Raylan emptied his pockets and stowed his wallet, SIG, and badge by the phone on the bedside table. He liked his weapon closeby when he slept.

He undressed down to his undershirt and boxers. “You need something to sleep in?” he asked Tim.

“Nah, I’m good.” Tim pulled off his own T-shirt. Up close in decent light, he could see the hint of red in Tim’s chest hair. He was gratified to know some part of Tim was still a redhead. He’d been caught on that the last couple years. Raylan licked his lips and looked away.

“Night, then.”

Raylan woke up when the bed dipped as Tim crawled in beside him. Tim’s bare skin brushed up against his, raising goosebumps even though Raylan burrowed under the covers.

“What’re you doin’?” Raylan mumbled, rolling onto his back.

He could make out the shape of Tim in the dark room from a thin sliver of separation between the curtains that let ambient light from the city slip into the room.

“Couch sucks.”

Raylan felt Tim’s hand on his cheek and then he was kissing him. Again.

Tim nailed the angle, right out the gate this time. Raylan wasn’t even sure how Tim’s tongue got into his mouth but there it was, sliding against his own. Raylan could feel his body responding to him. His technique was so much better this time that it turned Raylan’s stomach.

Raylan turned his head away from the kiss. “No, Tim.”

Tim pulled immediately away.

“Why?”

“I can’t do this.”

“Why not? You were in a gay bar. Looking to hook up, am I wrong about that?”

Raylan pushed his bangs back from his face in frustration. “You’re not wrong.”

“So it’s just me you don’t want.” The stark hurt in his voice tore at Raylan. “That’s it then.”

“No. No, no,” Raylan said. “That’s not it. You’re just…”

“Just what?” Tim said.

“Young.”

“I’m *legal* .”

“This time,” Raylan muttered. “But me takin’ advantage of you right now? It don’t sit right.”

Tim rolled away from him and collapsed to the bed.

“You’re not ‘takin’ any advantage’,” Tim said, morosely.

“I would be,” Raylan said. “It’s not gonna happen.”

“Fine.” Tim’s voice was full of bald hurt but the way he agreed carried a finality that put Raylan on edge. The mattress shifted as Tim started to get up out of bed. Raylan reached for him in the darkness and snagged his arm. He slipped his fingers down along Tim’s warm skin to his wrist.

“Stay.” Raylan wasn’t sure this was the right thing to do, but he knew in his gut that if he didn’t hang onto Tim now, when he got up in the morning, he’d likely be gone.

Tim stopped. “Why?”

“Not gonna have sex with you. But I like you next to me.” That was the truth. “Come’ere and sleep with me.”

Raylan rolled onto his back and pulled Tim in.

It took some wiggling and scooting but Tim’s head found its way to Raylan’s shoulder. He stretched his arm across Raylan’s stomach and sighed. Raylan wrapped his arm around him, then he entwined his fingers on his other hand with Tim’s. He told himself he did it so he’d know if Tim tried to run.

After all, the last time Raylan spurned one of his advances, he didn’t see Tim for years.

Of course, keeping Tim from rabbiting didn’t explain why Raylan couldn’t help himself from inhaling the scent of Tim’s hair or why he could barely refrain from dropping a kiss on his forehead.

Raylan took Tim home with him to stay in his basement apartment.

“I don’t want to go back to Texas,” Tim said as they crossed the Louisiana border on I10.

“Too late now.”

Tim reached over and pushed the buttons on the Crown Vic’s radio. He finally took to the dial and landed on a country music station playing a song about some girls killing a guy named Earl. Raylan didn’t hate it. He didn’t love it either. Too new. He’d rather they just play Patsy singing “Crazy.”

“Gil is still there.” Tim turned his face from Raylan and looked out the passenger-side window.

Raylan peeked over at him. Maybe flying down I10 wasn’t the best time to cover this, but Raylan had a couple points he wanted to go over before they got back to Corpus Christi.

“He won’t know you’re back.”

“What if he finds out?” Tim said.

“I was thinking maybe you wouldn’t be there all that long,” Raylan said.

“Wait, what?” Tim’s head whipped around. “You’re kicking me out before I even get there?”

“No. No, no,” Raylan said. “You used to want to go into the Army, right? Special forces?”

Tim snorted. “I can’t do that now.”

“Why? You into drugs?” Raylan asked and held his breath. He didn’t see anything in Tim’s belongings that indicated he was, but he had to ask.

“What? No,” Tim said. “I only turn tricks to eat.”

“You did.” Raylan looked at his watch. “Up to about sixteen hours ago. Not now.”

Raylan had another question he didn’t want to ask, but it had to be covered. “You been tested lately?”

“For?”

Raylan inhaled and pressed on. He questioned fugitives all the time. He could do this. “HIV.”

“Not in a couple months. I’m careful. And negative.”

Raylan bit back a sigh in an effort not to respond. He should be relieved with Tim’s easy answer but he didn’t like that Tim could be nonchalant in giving it. “All right. We’ll check on that. No business of the Army’s, is it?”

Tim swallowed audibly, then shrugged. He hadn’t brightened up.

“Fine. I broke my leg.”

“Healed, didn’t it?”

“I only got my GED.”

“Good.”

“I killed my father.”

“You listen here,” Raylan ordered. “*I* killed your father.”

Tim turned back to the window.

“Tim—we need to be real clear on that point.”

“You have vanilla ice cream, coffee, and beer.” Tim stood in the open door of the refrigerator.

Raylan’s apartment was one bedroom with a kitchen along one wall of his living room—a step up from a motel. He didn’t spend a lot of time there and ate most of his meals out.

He paused. He hadn’t really thought about having someone else living there. He’d just wanted to get Tim out of New Orleans. “We can order a pizza tonight. Guess we’ll have to hit the grocery tomorrow.”

“I thought you had to work tomorrow,” Tim said.

“Well, after work,” Raylan said, then he thought about when he met Tim and how many times he dropped by with takeout because his father failed to look after him. To even feed him. “Or we could go now?”

Tim eyed him carefully. “It’s kind of late.”

“You had other plans?” Raylan asked, grabbing his car keys and Tim’s hat.

“Nope.”

Groceries put away, Raylan was satisfied Tim wouldn’t starve while he was at work the next day.

He brought a pillow, sheets, and a blanket in from his bedroom and dropped them on the arm of the couch. “The couch isn’t bad,” Raylan said.

“I’m sleeping there?”

“Sure,” Raylan said. “Do you need the bathroom? I was going to take a shower.”

Raylan was almost asleep when he felt his mattress shift.

“What are you doin’?” Raylan asked.

“Sleepin’, Tim whispered.

“Tim,” Raylan cautioned.

“Just sleepin’.” Tim moved behind him and slipped his arm around Raylan’s chest.

Raylan thought he should argue and send him back to the couch. But the fact was, he liked how Tim’s body felt pressed up against his.

Raylan and Tim were arguing over Tim joining the military. Again.

“All I know how to do is turn tricks,” Tim insisted.

“Bullshit. The way you shoot, you don’t need to turn tricks.”

“You just don’t know,” Tim pouted.

“Neither do you,” Raylan said. “Let me call someone who does. Maybe you’ll listen to him.”

Raylan had met Marcel recovering a fugitive who turned out to be AWOL. After they hashed out who should take custody, Raylan spent a few weeks fucking Marce. It’d been a couple years back—not long after Cy Gutterson lost his head for the last time.

Marce was an Army MP when Raylan met him. Now, he was a recruiter.

When Marce met them in the parking lot of the Corpus Christi Shooting Club, Raylan gave him a one-armed hug. He figured that was safe at a shooting range in south Texas. He noticed Tim watching them with interest.

Marce flicked the brim of Raylan’s hat. “Stylin’.”

Raylan smiled. “Marcel, this is Tim, the guy I was telling you about.”

Marcel shook Tim’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Tim said.

Raylan tipped his head down so his hat obscured his face and he glanced over at Tim. S*ir?* He'd never called Raylan that—even back in the days when they were first tracking down his Uncle Gil.

Marce eyed the sign for the club and shook his head.

“You really gonna make me go in there, aren’t ya?”

Raylan smiled weakly. Marcel had point. The club was chock-full of old white men. Not a lot of other black men hanging around. Raylan had picked up memberships for Tim and himself here because it wasn’t the range where the deputies from his office put time in. He didn’t want to run the risk of having to answer questions about Tim. Didn’t hurt that the club also had a decent outdoor rifle range that Tim liked.

“You’re still on active duty,” Raylan scoffed. “Bet you could outshoot anyone here. ’Cept Tim and me.”

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” Marce laughed. “He that good?” His tone turned serious.

“He is.”

Tim pulled their weapons and targets from Raylan’s trunk. “Talk me up and watch me go in there and not be able to hit the broadside of a barn.”

“If they built a barn on that range since last week, you just go on ahead and try to miss it.”

They found an empty firing point and bench on the rifle range and didn’t have to wait long before the call went out that the range was going cold so Tim could head downrange and set up his targets.

“Fifty, a buck and two?” Marce shouted.

Raylan nodded to Marce and gave him a thumbs-up.

They’d put on their eye and ear protection when they entered the range.

Raylan nodded watching Tim set up a target on backers fifty, one-hundred, and two-hundred yards away and the other shooters checked and changed their targets.

When the officer announced the range was hot again, Tim shot while Raylan and Marce watched from behind him.

Raylan saw Marce’s eyes slide over to him when the range turned cold again and Tim headed downrange to retrieve his targets.

Marce tipped his head back toward the vending area.

Before Raylan followed him out, he waved at Tim. When he got his attention, he circled two fingers in the air and pointed in the direction of the pop machines. Tim raised a hand to acknowledge he understood they’d wait for him off range.

Marce sat at one of the picnic tables where smokers congregated with a Coke in front of him.

“You’re right, he’s good.”

“You ain’t see his targets yet. Should see him shoot skeet,” Raylan said. “If you’ve got the time, we can…”

Marce’s eyes were on Raylan. “I saw plenty. What are you thinkin’, Raylan?”

“Thought I explained that to you on the phone last week. Tim wants to enlist and maybe end up special forces.”

Marce pursed his lips considering either Raylan’s words or what he planned to say. Raylan wasn’t sure which. “I’ll be frank. He’s kind of young for you.”

Raylan jerked back. “It ain’t like that.”

“Then what’s it like?” Marce asked. “Because he watches you like you hung the fuckin’ moon.”

Raylan rubbed his upper lip and adjusted his hat. Tim’s hat. He’d never given it back and Tim hadn’t asked. One of these days, he was going to replace it, maybe with a Stetson. But at the moment, he was supporting the two of them on a GL-08 salary.

“He’s an old friend,” Raylan said.

Raylan could see doubt in the creases around Marce’s forehead. “Not much old about that one. Except maybe his eyes.”

Raylan agreed but said nothing. “If you could run down what he needs to get lined up if he wants to enlist and end up special forces, that’s all I’m hopin’ for.”

Tim found them a few minutes later. He handed off his targets. “Top one is fifty. Then hundred and two. Be right back.”

He headed for the vending machine while Marce flipped through the targets. The bull was blown out of the fifty-yard target. The shot groupings on the other targets were tight around the bulls-eye.

“He’d do well in marksmanship training,” Marce said, circling his finger around the shot grouping on the two-hundred-yard target.

Tim came back with a Sprite for himself and put a bottle of water down in front of Raylan, then he slid onto the bench next to him.

“You know your way around a gun,” Marce said. “Nice shooting.”

“Thanks.” Tim gave Marce one sharp nod.

“Raylan says you’re interested in special forces.”

Tim gulped down Sprite, then muttered. “Army.” He cleared the sugary pop from his throat. “Got any advice.”

“You been to college?”

“Not yet. I got my GED.”

“I don’t want to tell you straight up that the Green Berets and Delta Force are out for you, but it’s highly unlikely. Half the candidates they consider don’t make it through training. My advice is for you to shoot for the Army Rangers. And, a GED isn’t enough for what he wants to do.” The last sentence Marce directed to Raylan.

“Why’s that?” Raylan asked.

Tim elbowed Raylan. “I looked that up at the library, remember? Didn’t graduate from high school or put in vocational hours.”

“Right, so college,” Raylan said.

“He’s going to want an Option 40 going in,” Marce cautioned.

“That’s the Ranger ticket to ride, right?”

Tim screwed his face and rolled his eyes at Raylan’s simplification of the Option 40.

Marce laughed. “You read about it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Raylan side-eyed Tim again. He just wasn’t used to hearing him so… respectful.

Marce started to lay out what Tim would need to work on to qualify for an Option 40. He needed fifteen credit hours of college. Intro course would work. He warned Tim the Army only made 150 available a year but he’d do what he could to help him obtain one if Tim did what Marce suggested to the letter.

Raylan was already trying to figure out how he’d swing tuition. Tim’d have to start training —sooner rather than later—and that probably meant a gym membership, too.

Marce ran his hand up the side of his head to the back. His fade was growing out some; Raylan could see it at his hairline. If Marce was rubbing the hair on the back of his neck, bad news was coming.

“Here’s the last thing you need to think about,” Marce warned. “DADT is a fact of life in the Army.”

Raylan narrowed his eyes at Marce, then he shot Tim a look. “What?” Raylan asked.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell.” Tim’s voice was tight.

“Ah,” Raylan said.

“Did you tell him—” Tim started, turning to Raylan.

“I didn’t tell him shit,” Raylan said cutting Tim off. No one knew about Tim’s time in New Orleans other than Raylan. He’d kept Tim’s secrets just like Tim kept his. Marce already had the wrong idea about them. Or maybe the right one? No, wrong. As long as Tim was dependent on Raylan, Raylan wasn’t going there. And Raylan figured that by the time Tim could stand on his own, he wouldn’t want Raylan anymore.

“Then how? Oh, I get it,” Tim said as if everything was clear to him. He narrowed his eyes at Raylan.

Tim’s “oh” was loaded but made nothing clear to Raylan. “Oh, you get what?”

He pointed at Marce, then over to Raylan and back. “Y’all used to fuck.”

Marce coughed to cover a chuckle. Raylan could see him making an effort to exude composure and authority on Tim’s account. “The reason I bring up DADT is that part of Ranger School is getting along with your unit. If two units blackball you, you wash out. If you’re in the closet—and know you this, son, everyone gay in the Army is closeted by that damned law—you’ll have your work cut out for you.”

“I grew up hiding who I am,” Tim replied. “It’s not going to be a problem.”

A year later

August 2000—Corpus Christi, Texas

Raylan got used to having Tim in his space. In college, he’d had roommates, but lived alone since he graduated. He’d never lived with another person as intimately as he lived with Tim. Oh, they didn’t have sex, but Tim still slept with him. He cooked for him. He filled Raylan’s Thermos with coffee on days he knew he was heading off on a long stakeout.

Meanwhile, Raylan paid most of their bills. Tim got a part-time job working as a cook at one of the seafood restaurants off the Bay, but he never liked it all that much. Besides training, he took classes at Texas A&M. Tim paid for his own books, and Raylan footed the bill for his tuition. He figured that Helen had saved up for his tuition to get him out of Harlan, the least he could do was get Tim out of Texas. He was just paying it forward—or back.

Raylan found the arrangement a struggle at times.

The reason wasn't that Tim was hard to live with. More so that he wasn't. What Raylan tore himself up over was his uncertainty about whether he was living with his equal or someone he was parenting. Most days—and nights—it was both.

As the date approached for Tim to leave for Basic, he'd changed. Raylan pretended that he didn't notice.

But he did.

And did he ever.

Tim'd been training and working out leading up to the date he enlisted. With Marcel's help, he did get an Option 40. Tim had grown confident. The edges of his twink had rubbed off leaving a man a helluva lot bulkier in their bed.

Raylan's morning showers were so long that he'd gotten used to rinsing away his cum and shower gel with cold water because the hot water tank in their shit apartment didn't hold up. Tim'd switched to taking his shower at night a couple months before. He claimed it was to wash away the smell of the restaurant before bed, but he kept up his shower schedule on his off days, then after he quit the job. He just appeared in Raylan's bed clean and sometimes damp.

Raylan was dropping him off at the bus station the next morning.

"You got everything packed up?" Raylan asked.

"Everything I'm keeping," Tim said. "The rest is at my aunt's. She picked up some stuff while you were at work this afternoon."

"Saves me a trip out."

"Yeah."

Tim didn't have that much but more than he had when he'd come to live with Raylan. Donna wasn't happy about it but with the new gun safe they'd bought, she was keeping his guns and some boxes with family pictures and clothes Tim wanted to hold onto.

Tim climbed into their bed. Raylan had given up thinking of it as just his bed ages ago. He'd killed the bedroom light when he came out of the bathroom. After the momentary shock wore off of the overhead light extinguishing, Raylan's eyes adjusted. The mini blinds were cattywampus again allowing yellow to diffuse down across the room from the streetlight outside.

He didn't think Tim's feelings had changed, but he wasn't sure. He'd wake up some mornings to the feeling of Tim's cock pressed against his ass or thigh. Raylan was never sure if that was biology or desire.

Later, over the years, Raylan would wonder if he'd invited what happened that night.

Raylan rolled over to face Tim. He usually kept his back to him when they were in bed.

“’M real proud of you,” Raylan started.

“Are you?” Tim didn’t look all that sure. Raylan wondered if he should fix the blinds so they could get some sleep.

“’Course. You worked hard for this.”

“Am I gonna see you again?” Tim asked, uncertain.

Raylan felt a crack down the middle of his heart. “Why do you say that?”

“’Cause I wanna know.”

“Last time you asked me that, when I came back for you, you were gone,” Raylan pointed out.

“You were leaving that time,” Tim said. “This time, it’s me. Will you be here when I get back?”

“Darlin’, you know that depends. I could be transferred next month.”

“Darlin’?” Tim echoed.

“Seemed to fit—” Raylan didn’t get another word out because Tim’s mouth landed on his, and Raylan didn’t have it in him to push him away. Not this time.

Raylan dug his fingers into Tim’s hair as he slid his mouth up and down Raylan’s cock. Tim had one hand wrapped tight around the base, those long fingers grounding the currents buzzing under Raylan’s skin.

“Oh dear lord, I’m glad you didn’t cut your hair.”

Tim had talked about cutting it, but Raylan kept discouraging him, finally telling him he liked it long. Tim had turned those big blue eyes on him in a measuring look that lasted long enough that Raylan quickly changed the subject.

Raylan grabbed a handful of Tim’s hair in each hand. He didn’t hold him or even try to fuck his mouth. He wouldn’t do that. What Tim was doing on his own felt too good to interfere with. But knowing he could—that Tim would let him grab ahold and pump into his mouth—ignited the heat gathering in Raylan’s balls. He tried tapping on the back of Tim’s head.

He gulped in air and willed his hammering heart to slow down as the cool air replaced the warmth of Tim’s mouth on his cock—damp from Tim’s spit and Raylan’s cum.

“I think we should fuck,” Tim said.

Raylan opened his eyes and searched out Tim's face. He was glad he hadn't fixed the blinds. He hadn't caught his breath. "Mm'kay." Raylan sucked in air. "My underwear drawer has the stuff…"

He didn't need to say more. Tim was already up and across the room before Raylan knew it. Tim tossed Raylan a condom that landed on his chest. He blinked and picked it up. "But I…"

Raylan watched Tim's silhouette in the darkness as he moved back across the room with the bottle of lube. He heard the snap of the plastic top opening. Raylan narrowed his eyes in confusion as he watched Tim reach behind his back and apply lube. He hated how… practiced Tim was at that. In the time they'd been living together, neither had dated which meant this was something Tim picked up… before. Raylan forced himself not to think about it.

"What're you doin'?" Raylan slurred.

"Prep." Tim clicked the top shut and wiped his hand on the sheets. He tossed the bottle of lube onto the bed next to Raylan and then crawled toward him after it.

Raylan sighed and pulled himself up onto his elbows. Usually, he topped. He hadn't bottomed in… well, since just before college. "I was thinking maybe you could fuck me."

Tim's wide stunned eyes made Raylan thank god again for his landlord's cheap-ass blinds.

"But I never…" Tim sat back on his haunches staring down at Raylan.

"Exactly," Raylan said. "Then it's about time you did, huh?"

Putting Tim on the bus the next morning broke something in Raylan he didn't think would ever mend.

"I… should thank—" Tim began.

"Nah," Raylan interrupted, pushing his hat—well, Tim's old hat that Raylan wasn't ever giving back—lower to shield his eyes. "You were always headed this way."

"What're you doin' at work next week?" Tim changed the subject for him.

Raylan smiled to himself because Tim understood him. Raylan could hide his emotions in work talk about the last bandit he chased down. Tim liked to listen to Raylan talk about marshaling. He'd been spinning Tim yarns about his job for months now.

"I gotta leave to help with prison transport in Salt Lake City tonight."

And then it was time for Tim to go.

Tim shouldered his bag and held up a hand. "Write me."

Raylan didn't.

Ten years later

September 2010—Miami, Florida

I'm sending you the Eastern District of Kentucky," Dan said.

"I grew up in Kentucky. I don't wanna go back," Raylan said. "Send me anywhere else. Texas."

Dan's eyes glinted.

"You don't want to go back to Kentucky, but you'll go back to Texas?"

Raylan lied to himself and Dan. "Don't know why I said that."

But yeah, he did know why but not in a part of himself where he'd admit to that kind of self-indulgence.

Raylan had made his way down the east coast since he'd been assigned to the Southern District of Texas. He'd married and divorced. Living with Winona during his Glynco assignment in Georgia wasn't the easy stride that living with Tim in Texas had been. He shouldn't have been surprised when the bottom fell out. Their marriage carried a taint he never could shake. The direct result of marrying her was losing Tim. Raylan broke the news over the phone when Tim graduated from the Ranger Indoctrination Program.

Tim never called back.

In the last six years in Miami, Raylan'd been tempted to look to see if Tim was still in the Army. But he figured he'd lost his right to hold on to him.

September 2010—Lexington, Kentucky

When Raylan landed in Lexington, he took a cab to the courthouse.

He wasn’t necessarily eager to get to work; he just wanted his own wheels. He could have checked into a motel straight-up, but he wanted Art to go on ahead and assign a car to him.

Art wanted to take his measure, though. He pretended he was just bringing up gossip and pending cases, but Raylan knew his new chief well enough from their time at Glynco. He was trying to find the weak spots in Raylan's fence by throwing stones: Winona. Harlan. Boyd. Arlo.

By the time they were leaving the office, Raylan was ready for a drink.

“Come meet Rachel,” Art said. He introduced a deputy about his age named Nelson and then a round of others. “We have another deputy in fugitive operations… who’s out on a prison transport.” Art smirked. Raylan figured he was serious about everybody doing everything. “You’ll meet Tim tomorrow.”

“Tim?” Raylan paused. Lots of men named Tim, he thought.

It didn’t matter. Art had moved toward the door, not hearing Raylan ask the question.

The next day Raylan followed Art from Tate’s Creek Bridge to the scene of a church fire.

He parked his Town Car down the road and walked in. Fire and Emergency Services were still working the scene so Raylan badged his way through the barricades. When he cleared the sheriff’s deputy guarding the final strip of crime-scene tape, he recognized the deputy marshal in the bad tie and long-sleeved dress working the scene.

“Tim.” Raylan stared at him.

His hair wasn’t red anymore. Or long. Raylan felt a flash of loss for Tim’s long hair, his youth.

“Raylan,” Tim said back, by way of greeting. He had a cool edge to his tone.

Raylan hiked his eyebrows. He guessed he wasn’t surprised that Tim was still mad at him.

“You two know each other?” Art asked, interested.

“We’ve met,” Tim said, guarded.

“This is your first assignment,” Art said to Tim. When Tim didn’t comment further, Art turned to Raylan expectantly.

“Where did you two run into each other?” Art stared at Raylan and he knew he’d have to answer him.

Raylan pushed his hat back. “Texas.”

Art turned back to Tim. “That’s right. You said your people come from that area, didn’t you?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Tim said, turning to Rachel, dismissing them. “Did you get anything more out of Fandi?”

Of all the people Art had thrown at Raylan trying to take his measure in the last twenty-four hours, Tim was the weakest spot in his wall.

When Art went to rein in Rachel’s tirade on Pastor Fandi, he inadvertently gave Raylan some time with Tim.

“Nice hat,” Tim commented. “What happened to mine? Straw finally wear down? It give up the ghost?”

Raylan tipped his head to the side. He didn’t tell Tim he still had his hat at his condo in Florida. Winona tried to give it to Goodwill once, and they’d fought over it. “This one’s a little more professional.”

Tim eyed Raylan’s cowboy boots. “And is Ostrich leather professional?”

Raylan turned his right boot to the side. “Ostrich leg leather.”

“What’d those set you back?”

Raylan scowled at him. “Enough. What are you doing here?”

“I work here, Raylan.” Tim sounded annoyed.

“What happened to the Army?”

Tim rolled his eyes. “I got out.”

Raylan found out soon enough that Tim didn’t want to see him.

“But why, are you still mad about Winona?”

Tim didn’t look at him. He just watched Shirley Kelso’s trailer like it would roll off its underpinning and slip away from them if Tim didn’t keep his eyes glued to it.

“What do you think?” Tim asked.

Raylan prodded him to try to find out what happened with the Rangers. Tim dodged him some more but told him enough to make Raylan think that part of Tim’s life was done.

Then that night, Tim got his rifle out and took down Dupree, covering Raylan’s back.

Raylan didn't mean to take up with Ava Crowder, but Tim shot him down daily. Sometimes more than once a day. When he ran into Winona at the courthouse, he realized why he'd always liked her eyes so much. How come he'd never noticed her blue eyes had just reminded him of Tim?

Raylan felt like Tim had frozen up inside. Eventually, he just gave in to Ava.

Then the AUSA found out.

Raylan thought David Vasquez ran hot and cold. On one hand, he was fine with the idea of Raylan outright shooting prisoner Cal Wallace, but on the other, he dug into Raylan's shootings to pick at them.

Setting Boyd free was a disappointment. Raylan felt guilty about it but knew it was just a matter of time before Boyd blew something else up and they had him back in jail.

Raylan thought Vasquez was just coming for him again about Bucks when Art pulled him into his office for another meeting in which they'd felt obligated to shut the blinds. Raylan settled into a chair in front of Art's desk. His chief stood to the side and let Vasquez take his desk chair. Raylan raised his eyes at Art's decision to stand and face him rather than sitting with him. He shifted in his chair, suddenly unsure.

"Tell me about shooting Cy Gutterson," Vasquez said.

Raylan looked to Art for help, but his chief didn't seem surprised—or supportive. "All right. Long time ago, though," Raylan said. He crossed his leg and propped a boot on his knee. He traced the patterns in the leather with the pad of his finger.

"First shooting in the line of duty," Art said.

"First shooting period," Raylan answered. That wasn't the truth, but he wasn't going to stop telling the lie now.

"Cyril Gutterson is Tim's father?" Art's voice was calm, but Raylan wasn't taken in. His boss was angry.

Raylan didn't need to answer, so he didn't. Art already knew.

"That's how you two know each other."

"What happened that night?" Vasquez asked.

"Gutterson senior disarmed me, threw Tim down the stairs. When I was checking on him, Cyril took aim at me, and I shot him," Raylan said.

"File says the Cyril beat Tim's face profoundly," Vasquez said. He slid a photo across Art's desk. Raylan saw the crime pic documenting the damage to Tim's face. He swallowed and looked away, tracing the pattern on his boot again. He could feel his jaw ticking.

“File also says you put him down with your backup weapon,” Vasquez said. “You let him take your service weapon?”

“I wasn’t quick enough.”

Art scoffed.

“It was a long time ago, Art,” Raylan said. “I got faster. Better.” He wondered where the photos of the bruising on his wrist were. They’d been taken back in the day.

“I’ve got to tell you, they did a shit job investigating your shooting back in ’96,” Vasquez said. “We can’t prove it didn’t go down that way.”

“That’s because it *did* go down that way,” Raylan said. “You callin’ me a liar?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. I do have to wonder why you didn’t disclose to Art how you and Deputy Gutterson know each other.”

“Maybe Tim don’t want everybody knowing his business,” Raylan said.

“Let’s bring him in and see if his answers match,” Vasquez replied, smiling like he was doing Raylan a favor.

“Who shot your father, Tim?” Vasquez asked.

Tim didn’t look at Raylan. He was impressed by Tim’s countenance.

“Raylan did,” Tim said.

“You don’t think that was something you should have mentioned?” Art demanded.

“Doesn’t have any bearing on the workplace,” Tim answered.

“This does, though,” Vasquez said. He started handing several sheets of paper over to Tim.

“What is that?” Raylan asked.

Vasquez held up his hand for Raylan to remain silent. “Let Deputy Gutterson answer the question.”

“My enlistment papers.” Tim handed a sheet to Raylan. “And… my transcripts from Texas A&M?”

“What’s the address listed there?” Vasquez asked.

“My old place on Montague Street in Corpus Christi,” Raylan answered. He knew that the address of his apartment was on all of Tim’s paperwork.

Vasquez waited, staring at him with his eyebrows high on his forehead.

“Why did you have the son of a man you shot living with you?” Vasquez asked.

Raylan drew breath to start to answer, but Tim beat him to it. “I was homeless. He helped me out of a bad situation.”

“With a little too much force,” Vasquez commented. “Deadly force, in fact. Were you two having a relationship?”

Raylan started to protest. That might have been how they’d ended up but it wasn’t how it’d started. “Hey now—”

“Deputy Givens, the last time we sat down like this, you were having a relationship with a witness. The question speaks to pattern.”

Tim shot Raylan a hard look. “He got me off the street. I never would have enlisted or gone into the Rangers if Raylan hadn’t stepped up.”

“So, you feel like you owe him something?” Vasquez’s question was leading and Raylan rolled his eyes.

“He was a mentor,” Tim explained, “when I needed one.”

Vasquez threw up his hands and turned to Art.

“This reeks of that thin blue line bullshit I normally run into with the FBI,” Vasquez bit off.

“You mean the blue line that divides criminals from innocent victims and the LEOs who stand up for them?” Tim offered.

“I was thinking of the one where cops protect each other at all costs,” Vasquez replied.

“Your logic doesn’t play out,” Tim said. “I wasn’t a cop until recently.”

Art hummed drawing all eyes in the room. “Why *did* you become a marshal, Tim?” Art asked.

“A marshal shot my father,” Tim replied. “Seemed like the right side of the blue line to me.”

Vasquez closed his satchel after shoving his paperwork and laptop back in.

Raylan started to follow the AUSA and Tim out the door of Art’s office when the chief called them back.

“You two hold up,” Art ordered.

Tim shifted his eyes in warning. Raylan wanted to chuckle. He, too, recognized the dangerous tone in Art’s voice from the years they’d worked together at Glynco. Raylan liked that Tim was perceptive enough to pick that up.

“Vasquez might be satisfied with your bullshit answers, but they don’t fly with me.”

“Art, what’d you want to know?” Raylan asked.

“Were you two fucking?”

Raylan scowled. “Geez Art. We’re not—”

“Oh, cut the shit,” Art said. “Tim’s gay.”

That drew Raylan up short. “You’re out?” he whispered to Tim as if Art couldn’t hear them.

Tim shrugged back and Raylan caught part of an eye roll. How had he missed that Tim was out?

“Yeah, Raylan, he’s out,” Art said. “At least that tells me you’re probably not still doing it.”

“We’re not,” Tim said with a vehemence that drew Art’s glance.

“It wasn’t like that,” Raylan said.

“No? What was it like?” Art countered.

Raylan looked over at Tim, who shrugged. “Go ahead.” He sounded tired.

“We might have crossed that line,” Raylan admitted. “Once.”

Art didn’t say anything at first, but pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for longer than Raylan was comfortable with.

“You two haven’t just tangled up Vasquez’s blue lines, you’ve tied ’em in knots.”

“No, it’s not—” Raylan protested.

“Here’s how this is going to work,” Art cut him off. “If I get one whiff that you two are so much as ogling each others’ asses or giving each other moon eyes, I’ll transfer Tim the hell out here. You,” Art said pointing at Raylan, “I’m stuck with. But I can send Tim wherever the hell I see fit. And I *like* Tim. So doin’ that’ll just piss me off, and I’ll make your life a living hell.” Art stabbed his finger in the air at Raylan for good measure.

“Right,” Raylan agreed.

“Got it,” Tim echoed.

“No dating. No playing slap and tickle. Nothing that will compromise either of you,” Art said. “You’re both too damn trigger happy for me to ever believe one or the other of you—if not both—won’t end up in court eventually for putting some asshole down. And what are you going to do when you can’t testify for each other because some lawyer proves you’re having a romantic relationship?”

“I’m tellin’ you, Art, it ain’t—” Raylan tried to say once more.

“Like that,” the chief finished. “I heard you the first time.”

Raylan thought he’d hated Kentucky before Art drew a no-trespass line around Tim. But what was worse was seeing signs of that wear on Tim.

When Art called Tim down to Harlan to badge them into the VA, Raylan started to suspect Tim was drinking the problem away. Then, he had to watch Tim flirt with the soldier manning the door with his own two eyes.

The night went from bad to worse when Tim met Arlo. The whole meeting was exactly what Raylan’d come to expect from Arlo. Afterward, when they’d been called to the next crime scene, Tim pulled him aside while Art was occupied by the Kentucky State Police.

“You pitied me,” Tim said.

“No, never.” Raylan didn’t know what Tim was talking about at first, but he’d never pitied him. He’d seen himself in the younger Tim. He’d worried about him. He cared for him—even lusted after him. But pity was never something Raylan had ever felt for Tim.

“Your daddy…” Tim trailed off

“I know. He’s one of a kind.” Raylan watched Art, vigilant. It wouldn’t do for Art to turn around and catch them, especially after he had to bodily block Tim from going after Arlo.

“Nope. He’s just like mine was.”

“I did notice that back in the day.” Raylan side-eyed Tim.

“Is that why you... ?” Tim didn’t finish. They didn’t dare speak of it.

Raylan didn’t acknowledge the unspoken question but answered a different one. “At first, helping you out was just the job. Then, I got to know you. You work fugitive recovery now. Surely you seen some things by now. Situations no reasonable man would turn his back on.”

“Yeah. But it’s… never like that.”

“No, no,” Raylan said. Tim was right. There’d never been any other case where Raylan stepped in to that degree. Never would be again. “Guess Arlo’s not the only one of a kind.”

Raylan couldn’t stand to see what Tim’s reaction was, so he just walked off to see what Art had found out. He didn’t care where Art sent him, but he didn’t want Tim to end up in Alaska.

For nearly two years, Raylan did a halfway decent job staying away from Tim—up until he had one foot out of Kentucky. All he had to do was finish this case against Boyd, then he had a daughter and a position chasing bandits back down in Miami.

Art was out on sick leave and he didn't think Rachel had cottoned to the mandate that Raylan and Tim had to steer clear of personal entanglements.

Tim set up a command station at Arlo's while they built a case against Boyd. Seeing him in his family home raked Raylan raw. He came downstairs the first night they slept in the house and found Tim sitting on the porch drinking beer in the dark.

Raylan grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the kitchen and a jelly glass.

"You couldn't sleep?" Raylan made his way out to the porch.

He could smell cool weather lingering on the wind. He took a chair across from Tim and poured himself a drink. He set the bottle on the wood slats of the floor and stretched his long legs out in front of him, crossing his bare feet.

Tim leaned forward in his chair and dropped his elbows to his knees, his head hanging down. He rolled the neck of the beer bottle between his palms, letting it dangle between the spread V of his legs. Tim finally stopped and looked up.

Raylan's breath caught in his throat at the look in Tim's eyes. It'd taken most of the whole two years Raylan'd been in Kentucky, but Tim was starting to thaw. Maybe that wasn't a good thing after all.

His Tim now looked broken.

"Darlin', are you all right?"

"God no, don't do that," Tim groaned. He deflated back into the chair and let his head roll on his shoulders.

"Do what?"

"Call me *that*."

Raylan swallowed what was in his glass and stood up.

"C'mon," Raylan said, holding a hand out to Tim. "Back to bed. Sleep with me."

"We *can't*," Tim whined, but he put his hand in Raylan's.

Raylan lips quirked and pulled him to his feet. He watched Tim tip his head back and chug the rest of the beer, his throat moving with the rhythm making Raylan curl his toes into the porch flooring.

"Just sleep," Raylan whispered conspiratorially. "Art will never know."

Tim set down the empty bottle on the flat arm of the wooden chair he'd vacated. "Like we used to?" Raylan could hear hope, or maybe nostalgia in his voice.

"Whatever you want."

Raylan was never the big spoon when they lived together back in Texas. But here in Arlo's old bed, he wrapped Tim up in front of him. Raylan slid his hand into Tim's chest hair, delighted that there was so much more of it. He nosed the back of Tim's ear. His hair was so short now. The red was gone unless natural light hit it just right. Even with the scents of beer and that wild tang of early fall clinging to him, Tim still smelled the same as he always had.

"I missed this." Tim's voice was low and sleepy.

"Me too."

One month later

October 2012—Miami, Florida

Moving back to Florida felt like Tim leaving for Basic all over again.

In the Miami office, Tim wasn't on the other side of the glass tossing smart-ass shots at Raylan. In the field, he didn't have Tim at his back when he headed into a dangerous scenario.

If he ignored the traffic, Miami even felt a little bit like Corpus Christi with the tourists flocking in for the beaches. He was reliving losing Tim all over again—and a whiff of salt air now and then only drove the pain of that realization home.

Art forbade them from having a relationship, but Raylan had always loved Tim outside the structure of a formal, traditional romantic partnership. When he got to Florida and that space Tim had filled was empty again, Raylan realized he'd been loving Tim outside the margins of the norm going on fourteen years.

And now Tim was gone. Again.

His balm for that loss the first time had been Winona. Soaking up that comfort cost him the marriage and Tim. Familiarity coupled with age taught him to recognize the loss for what it was and not try to fill the hole Tim left in his life with what he didn't really want.

So, he picked up the phone and did what he should have when Tim left for Basic: he called him.

Tim stopped suspiciously asking what Raylan wanted after about three calls.

After about a month of daily calls, Raylan talked to Tim on his cell while he watched the sun fade the paint on a bandit's house outside Clewiston. He told Tim about an open Federal position he'd found.

“You know, there’s a job opening in the Miami sector of the US Coast Guard,” Raylan said.

Tim didn’t respond.

“You still there?” Raylan asked.

“Yeah, I thought you loved being a deputy marshal.”

“I do.”

“Then why do you want to work for the Coast Guard? Is it the shootings…”

Raylan exhaled in a long sigh. Tim’d told him one night about this theory he had: Raylan was so free with his gun because he was making up for not killing Cy. He told Tim he was wrong but sometimes late at night, he wasn’t so sure. He’d had to admit that Tim knew him better than he knew himself.

“No. The job’s not for me, idiot,” Raylan said.

“Then who…”

“You.”

Tim grew quiet.

“Did I lose you?”

“Nope. Won’t happen again.” Tim’s voice was thick. “I don’t want to work for the Coast Guard.”

“Okay. Do you want to work down here?”

“Are you asking me to come to Florida?”

“Ain’t that what I’ve been saying.”

“Not in English, no.”

Raylan snorted.

The Coast Guard job was just the first. Raylan kept throwing out open lines until he found a job in Miami that Tim didn’t hate.

He’d turned his nose up at the DEA and gave Raylan a hard no on Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Raylan himself nixed a FEMA position in Orlando because he wasn’t going to get Tim all the way down to here only to live hours away from him.

A position in the Miami Field Division of the ATF hit pay dirt.

“You don’t get to drink the alcohol, you know,” Raylan said. He’d gotten used to Tim shooting down all the open positions he brought up. Raylan’d begun to worry that he didn’t want to come down at all.

“Asshole. I told you I stopped that.”

“Sure. I know,” Raylan said. He did know. “I just can’t believe you didn’t say no.”

“I’ll apply.”

Raylan picked Tim up from the airport when he flew down for an interview at the Miami Division of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Raylan took him back to his condo. They had a few hours before his interview and Tim could shower and change into his suit there.

“Wow, nice place,” Tim said. “Better than those shitty motels in Kentucky.”

“I was paying a mortgage on this place.”

Tim's eyes swept down Raylan’s body to his feet. At first, he thought Tim was checking him out.

“And here I thought you were compensating for the two-thousand-dollar boots.”

Raylan scowled. “C’mon. You can put your stuff in here.”

Tim followed him past a bedroom that was designated for Willa, an office, then back to his bedroom. Tim stopped in the doorway.

“This is your bedroom?”

“It is. Is that a problem?” Raylan honestly never considered Tim wouldn’t want to sleep with him.

“Nope. Not at all.” Tim rolled his suitcase into the room and lifted it to the bed. “Mind if I hang up my suit?”

“Closet and hangers are behind that door if you need them.”

Raylan slipped into the bathroom and shut the door. When he returned, he found Tim standing in the door of his walk-in closet with his old hat in his hand. The hat had seen better days. Eventually, Raylan couldn’t wipe the sweat stains away and the tight weave of its straw had frayed on the back edge of its brim.

“You kept it.”

Raylan crossed the room to him. “’Course I did.”

“Why?”

Raylan took Tim’s face in his hands. “I didn’t have you.”

He’d been planning on initiating a kiss for once. But Tim beat him to it. Raylan did his best not to respond to the force of the kiss and Tim’s momentum too loudly, but an “ummph” eked out regardless.

Tim’s lips didn’t leave his but he mumbled against his mouth, “You okay?”

“Don’t stop,” Raylan answered. He cradled Tim’s face in both hands and tipped his head to the left to deepen the kiss. He tried to navigate them toward the bed.

Tim came up for air when the back of his knees hit the mattress. “Don’t plan to.”

“Bed,” Raylan murmured.

“Oh yeah.” Tim let him push him back onto the mattress, breaking their kiss.

Tim lay across Raylan’s bed on his back. He pushed his case toward Raylan. “Take this, would you?”

Raylan put the case aside. “Do we have time to…” He let his eyes travel Tim’s body. He rarely got to see him in blue jeans when they worked together in Kentucky. Raylan’d forgotten how well he wore them.

“Three hours. Your city. You tell me.”

“We got a least an hour. More depending on how long it takes you to get cleaned up.”

“Is your hot water heater big enough for both of us to have a shower before the next equinox?”

Raylan laughed a little, remembering their shitty shower in Corpus Christi. Tim started on the buttons of his shirt, then tugged it free of his jeans. Raylan watched in awe.

“If I lie and tell you no, will you share a shower with me?” Raylan caught the shirt Tim threw at him. He hung it over the footboard, then he pulled his own shirt off.

Raylan left Tim long enough to grab supplies out of the bathroom. When he got back Tim had pulled back the bedspread and was laying on his back in the middle of the bed. One leg was bent at the knee and the other akimbo in obvious invitation. Tim had his cock in his hand stroking it in a languid careless manner.

Raylan groaned. He tossed a condom onto Tim’s stomach and pinned him with a pointed look.

Tim grinned his crooked little smile back. “You remember.”

Raylan sat down on the bed next to him. “Like I could ever forget…”

Tim looked up at him through his lashes. “That was the first time I ever topped.”

Raylan bent to kiss him. “I know,” he whispered against his lips. “You told me, but I woulda known.”

“How?”

“You told me with your body.”

“Are you saying I was bad at it?” Tim pushed Raylan away from him.

Raylan chuckled. “God no. You just… you trembled…”

“I don’t remember that,” Tim said.

“I never forgot it.”

Tim swallowed. “Holy shit.”

“What?”

“What’dya say we switch it up?”

Raylan was fine with that. Tim let him handle the condom and the lube. Raylan used his fingers to open Tim up. He thought they were going with missionary since that was how he and Tim had done it before. When he slipped the condom on, Tim pulled one of Raylan’s pillows down to the middle of the bed and rolled over onto his stomach. Raylan watched transfixed as Tim wiggled around so the pillow was under his hips.

And goddamn if his ass wasn’t sweet. Raylan had a memory flash of Tim dancing under blue lights—the first time Raylan had ever noticed this particular part of Tim. But this. This was so much better.

“This okay?” Tim looked over at him.

Raylan’s cock was more than okay with it. “It is.”

This position was a new one for Raylan. He started out timid and slow, but was soon laid out on top of Tim, their legs tangled together. Raylan had a handful of one of Tim’s ass cheeks in one palm tugging it to the side so he could get as deep as he could. The sounds Tim made every time Raylan’s cock hit him at a certain angle egged him on. Tim kept canting his hips to accommodate that angle and then shifting back away from him.

“C’mon Darlin’,” Raylan encouraged.

“I can’t.” Tim literally whined, stretching out the word, and Raylan hiccuped a laugh. He didn’t have the breath for more.

“Oh, you can.”

“It’s too good.” Tim kissed Raylan over his shoulder and Raylan lost it, fucking him into the mattress while he grunted, then moaned.

Before he could come, Raylan pulled back and tugged Tim back up onto his knees into a position he was more familiar with. He wanted to be able to reach Tim, too, so he could stroke him off while he came. But Tim got there first, coming hard and clamping down on Raylan’s cock. He couldn’t last after that and gave in to the orgasm that he’d been holding back.

He slid his hands down Tim’s skin as he came, tracking his freckles and moles, then Raylan collapsed on top of him.

“Ummph, you’re heavy,” Tim finally said. “And I’m in the wet spot.”

“Sorry.” Raylan reached down to hold the condom in place and rolled off him. He’d gone soft inside Tim. Raylan wondered if he could fuck Tim some day and stay inside him after he came until he got hard again. He’d never tried that. Now that he thought of it with Tim, he wanted it. All of it.

Tim turned his head to face him and he slid a hand onto Raylan’s stomach. Raylan entwined their fingers together like he did that night he found Tim in New Orleans and was afraid he’d lose him if he didn’t hold on tight. He was glad now that he had.

“Don't leave this time. Please.”

Tim looked surprised, like leaving never occurred to him.

“Not happenin’, but if it did,” Tim said, “somehow, I’d get back to you.”

Tangled Up in Blue

By Chrisdedael

Deputy US Marshal Raylan Givens' personnel jacket contains a report on the first man he ever killed in the line of duty a Texas fugitive by the name of Cy Cutterson. Only Raylan never shot him. But Tim sure did.

When he got to Florida and that space Tim had filled was empty again, Raylan realized he'd been loving Tim outside the margins of the norm going on fourteen years.
And now Tim was gone. Again.

Raylan dug his fingers into Tim's hair as he slid his mouth up and down Raylan's cock. Tim had one hand wrapped tight around the base, those long fingers grounding the currents buzzing under Raylan's skin.
"Oh dear lord, I'm glad you didn't cut your hair."

"Will I go to prison?" Tim asked.
"Gimme the gun." The order was quiet.
"But I'm the one who killed…"
"Now, none of that. He took my gun, then threw you down the stairs. He was going to finish the job when I came down to check on you. I put him down to avoid that. Got it?"
"But…"
"Do you understand, Tim?" Raylan insisted.
"Fine, but why?"
"It'll go easier on you this way. You're gonna have enough to deal with," Raylan said.

End Notes

Thank you for reading.

I Tumble and even have a Givenson blog for my Holler series:
Cher-locked
The Holler Blog

Please feel free to comment. I make an effort to reply within a reasonable time. Any comments and kudos are much appreciated.
xxox

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